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ABSTRACT

Sex roles in two disparate areas, reading and literature, are treated separately in this paper. Sex-related factors listed which may attribute to the high incidence of boys experiencing reading difficulty were: (1) predominance of female teachers in the primary grades, (2) boys' lack of interest in basal readers, (3) adults considering reading a female activity, (4) effect of different socialization processes of females and males upon school success, (5) teacher attitude toward males during reading instruction. Sex discrimination does appear to predominate in English and American literature and literary criticism. College text in English literature are male oriented and few women writers exist in English literature before the nineteenth century. Thus, it appears that materials prepared for the instruction of children are heavily slanted in favor of males and male pursuits and that "literature is traditionally and obviously male centered." On the basis of current information it appears that no single factor, including sex discrimination, is responsible for boys' reading difficulties. (WR)

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# SEX ROLES IN READING

Most schools, reporting the incidence of reading problems, reveal that more boys have reading difficulties than do girls. Almost universal agreement exists that boys are more likely to experience difficulty in learning to read than are girls. Entwisle says that over ninety per cent of referrals to reading clinics in the United States are males and notes that this sex difference is apparently minimal in European countries.[3]

A number of explanations have been advanced for this phenomenon. One theory is that most teachers in the primary grades are women, and that while small girls may identify with a female teacher, the small boys have no such figure with whom to identify. Another is that many adults consider reading to be a feminine activity, i.e., girls are expected to enjoy reading because it does not entail physical movement while boys are assumed to prefer physical activity and to resist the passivity of the typical classroom. If this theory is valid, perhaps both boys and girls are reinforcing adult expectations. Still another reason advanced is that the content in many basal readers includes material which holds little interest for boys. No conclusive evidence supports any of these theories, but we find that remedial and corrective reading classes are made up largely of boys. Perhaps small boys need to be liberated from the physical constraints of the traditional classroom.

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Entwisle calls attention to the fact that mother-child interactions are studied more frequently than father-child interactions and that actions of fathers may be important in reading. She wonders how much of boys' retardation in reading could be accounted for by the lesser availability of male-role models for reading and for other verbal behaviors in the pre-school years.[3] This factor has not been researched extensively, but it may be a contributing factor to the high incidence of reading problems of boys.

That sex is an important variable in language development is emphasized by Carroll who notes its peculiar status in mediating both hereditary and environmental influences. He cites Bayley's finding that correlations between early vocalization and later verbal intelligence test scores are much more pronounced in girls than in boys. A number of investigators have noted that girls usually begin to talk at an earlier age than boys, and this early talking may give girls an advantage in later language development. Constitutional factors tend to make boys more active physically and less disposed to advance in language development in their early years. Carroll says, on the other hand, that the nearly universal finding that girls exhibit accelerated language achievements may possibly be explained as due primarily to characteristic differences between the ways boys and girls are reared and socialized. Girls appear to take more interest in school work and to be more amenable to being taught. A consequence of this, perhaps,

is that girls consistently do better on tests of verbal intelligence and achievement, particularly tests involving written language. Nearly all of the ten intellectual factors listed by Guilford for which there is evidence of sex differences favoring girls are factors involving language. The intellectual factors in which males tend to show superiority involve the perception of spatial figures. That sex differences in language development are culturally determined is reinforced by Preston's finding that while girls are superior in reading skill in the United States, boys are superior in Germany--a country where there are more male teachers and where cultural attitudes toward the sexes are different from those characteristic of the United States. Carroll cautions that all sex differences are of relatively small extent, with the distributions of various measures of language development and skill showing great overlap. He theorizes that cultural and social trends in this country are working toward reducing differences between boys and girls in language development.[1]

Whether or not differential behavior on the part of first grade teachers during reading instruction discriminates against male learners was investigated by Good and Brophy. They cited the Davis and Slobodian study which revealed that first grade teachers did not discriminate against male readers during reading instruction. However, the pupils' responses to interview questions demonstrated that pupils perceived both differential teacher treatment and differential achievement.

Good and Brophy postulated that the dependent measures employed by Davis and Slobodian in their observation system were not sensitive to the subtle processes through which teachers exert differential influence on male and female readers. The study was conducted in four first grade classrooms. Teachers, who were told that the purpose of the study was to examine classroom behavior from various achievement levels, did not know that their own behavior was being coded or that certain children were targeted for special observation. A special system was constructed to record differential teacher behaviors during reading instruction with the source of the interaction coded, indicating whether the interaction was initiated by the teacher or the child.

Results of the study indicated that teachers extended equal treatment to boys and girls during reading instruction. The data did show, however, differential teacher treatment by student achievement level, with high achievement students, both male and female, receiving preferential teacher behavior in some instances.

The investigators concluded that boys and girls received equal treatment during reading instruction, and that the data extended the external validity of the Davis and Slobodian study. In both studies, however, children reported that boys received inferior teacher treatment or more negative comments from teachers during reading instruction. When teacher-child interaction from all areas of classroom life was analyzed, it was found that boys did receive more teacher criticism than

did girls. The investigators hypothesized that the reason children reported preferential teacher behavior was that it is probably an impossible task for a child to discriminate between behavior in reading groups and behavior in other classroom or non-classroom activities.

Good and Brophy suggest that future research might focus on preinstructional teachers or on parental influence on child reading behavior.[4] This suggestion reinforces Entwisle's question concerning male role models for reading and other verbal behaviors.

The criticism directed toward the female stereotypes in books for young children is concerned not only with textbooks but also with trade books or children's literature. The charge made by Fisher that children's books were unfair to girls, that they did not represent the real world of today, and that they combined into an almost incredible conspiracy of conditioning, encouraging the achievement drive of boys and discouraging that of girls led Nilsen to examine some eighty trade books for young children. Her sample consisted of the winners and runners-up of the Caldecott Award for the past twenty years. The Caldecott Award is presented by the American Library Association for the most distinguished picture book of the year. Nilsen's rationale for concentrating on picture books rather than books for independent readers was that the illustrated books influence children at the time they are in the process of developing their own sexual identity. Children determine the appropriateness of sex roles at an early age.

Of the eighty books she examined, Nilsen found ten picture book

stories in which girls were the leading characters and twenty-four with boys. Noting that there is a real need for books presenting models which could show, accurately and realistically, ways in which women and girls can function successfully as individuals, Nilsen examined the reasons for what appeared to be a prejudice against girls in children's books. One factor is the English language--there are no singular pronouns equivalent to the plurals they, their, and them; consequently, any animate being is referred to by the singular masculine he or feminine she. The indefinite pronoun one lacks the informality appropriate for children's picture books. Children interpret language quite literally, and when they hear expressions such as chairman or brotherly love, they think of men rather than of the human race. Proper and common nouns are based on the male form with a suffix added to indicate the feminine--such as Paul-Paulette, god-goddess, host-hostess, etc. She found that the artist, in some books, slanted the illustrations toward boys even when there was nothing in the text to suggest that it was a boy's book.

The investigator cited several reasons for the decreasing trend in illustrated books written about or for girls; nine of the ten books about girls were written during the fifties but only one in the sixties. The passage of the National Defense Education Act in 1961 allowed the use of federal funds to purchase science books for school libraries, so publishers produced science books, a field traditionally thought appropriate for males, and social studies books which frequently centered about great events and great people, another natural for male

orientation since women have generally been absent from history books.

Because they realized that boys experienced more difficulty in learning to read than girls, publishers began producing easy to read books with controlled vocabularies, specifically designed for boys and purposely defeminized and male oriented. The sixties also gave rise to books focused on minority groups, especially black children, with the central character usually a boy. Nineteen of the eighty books in the sample were based on folk tales which, by their very nature, inevitably were set in a time when all activity required brute strength, so by necessity men were the doers and women looked on. This factor probably biased Nilsen's sample.

Nilsen alleges that the cliche that boys will not read books about girls--many instructors in children's literature tell this to their students--is a myth, for, in fact, they never get an opportunity to do so. She concludes that the sex of the leading character is immaterial; the important factors are the action and the humor.[7]

Although the content in basal reading series has been considered by some to discriminate against boys' learning to read, Howe criticizes both readers and social studies texts for the depiction of the female role in the "typical" American family--the mother who does not work, a father who does, two children--a brother always older than his sister--and two pets whose ages and sexes parallel those of the brother and sister. Boys build or paint things; girls play with dolls and help mother cook or clean. Howe concludes that the books which school girls read prepare them early for the goal of marriage,

rarely for work, and never for independence.[6]

One indication of whether or not sexual bias is found in material read by children, both in text and trade books, can be determined by the use of masculine and feminine proper names and pronouns. The American Heritage Word Frequency Book by Carroll, et. al., is a count of 5,088,721 words sampled from all books used as texts or for free reading by children in grades three through nine. All of the books selected, which were suggested by educators, were designated for particular grade levels. The more than one thousand different publications included books used as texts in courses as varied as reading, language, music, art, shop, home economics, science, social studies, etc., plus a large sampling from library books suggested for the grade and age levels. Obviously the content of material cannot be determined without the context, but since nouns or pronouns are subjects of sentences, the number of times a particular word appears in material is significant. One hundred eleven proper names had a Standard Frequency Index of 50.0 or better which means that they were among the top ten per cent in frequency of use; 83 of these were boys' names but only 28 were girls' names. There are 86,644 masculine pronouns but only 25,089 feminine pronouns. The words boy or boys appear twice as frequently as girl or girls.[2]

Although a variety of causes has been postulated to be responsible for the fact that boys experience more difficulties in learning to read than do girls, no evidence exists to attribute it to a single

factor. We do know that sex is an important variable in language development. Apparently teachers do not discriminate against boys in teaching children to read. Although the content in trade books traditionally has not appealed to boys, there are more trade books written with boys as central characters than girls. Boys' names and masculine nouns and pronouns appear considerably more frequently than do girls'. Although the evidence seems ambiguous, we still are faced with the statistics that more boys have difficulty learning to read than do girls. Whatever the cause of boys' reading difficulty may be, there seems little reason to believe that discrimination is a factor.

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